

FAUSTO ROMITELLI: DRAWN FROM ROMITELLI'S OWN DESCRIPTIONS OF HIS MUSIC SIX KEYWORDS

BY ALESSANDRO ARBO

Permeated by a desire to explore the trajectories of the degradation of material sound, impregnated with the atmosphere of psychedelic rock and the obsessive gestures of techno, direct, visionary, yet at the same time calculated right down to the last detail, admirably written, the music of Fausto Romitelli strikes one right from the start for the qualities of its style and the energy of its expression. To present it here we'll make use of some key concepts or key terms, taken for the most part from the lexicon with which Romitelli himself represented it: sound, modernity, high and low, degeneration, paroxysm, and profundity.

Sound

Anyone who had the good fortune to meet Romitelli probably still has the impression of hearing him pronounce this word, suono, with that highly characteristic intonation of his, drawing out the "o" with a satisfied resonance. When he used to listen to the music of others, the sound was the first thing (and sometimes the last) that his attention fell upon. He conceived a substantial part of his job as a composer as an attempt to put its energy to work. He drew inspiration from the about-turn effected by the composers of the *Itinéraire*, in



THE MUSIC OF FAUSTO ROMITELLI STRIKES ONE RIGHT FROM THE START WITH THE QUALITIES OF ITS STYLE AND THE ENERGY OF ITS EXPRESSION.

the wake of other important 20th-century composers. Much more than "compose with sounds," what was at issue, for him, was to "compose sound," a formula which should not, however, draw us into error. In fact, on listening to Romitelli's music, one quickly appreciates that "composing the sound" was not an end, but rather a means—without doubt the most important—to open a window on the world. He himself said this on numerous occasions. Composition was for him a visionary practice and at the same time an instrument for taking cognizance of reality, almost a kind of probe, capable of registering the reactions and mutations in our sensibility. However suspect the word "expression" might have appeared to him (in fact, it used to horrify him, perhaps because he immediately associated it with what appeared to him like the cheap pathos of New Age or Neo-impressionism), it is perhaps the most suitable to illustrate this intent. Because the sound of Fausto Romitelli—a sound that does not hide but, on the contrary, flaunts its artificial, synthetic nature, that presents itself right from the start as filtered, degraded and even dirty, but that is also able to be magnetic and extraordinarily seductive—is one of the most sincere and refined expressions of a manner we have of feeling and reacting in a world ever more crammed with technology, crisscrossed by the flows of planetary communication, and the violent homogenizing forces of the global market.

Modernity

It would be nice to be able to avoid such an old and compromising term as modernity. But I think that this would be, if not impossible, then inopportune, not just because this was a term to which, in spite of everything, Romitelli used to often make recourse, but because, accompanied by a necessary clarification, it continues to fulfil an important function. On listening to Romitelli's works one cannot not be struck by the innumerable musical influences that are incorporated within them, from Strauss to Grisey, from Hendrix to Pink Floyd, to David Bowie, to Sonic Youth, Aphex Twin, Pan Sonic. How can one not suspect, behind such a heterogeneous network of references, that typically post-modern trait: the carefree pleasure of interweaving, reshuffling the cards on the table, hybridizing, contaminating or parodying the works and traditions from the immense global musical library? Instead, such thoughts could not be further from the intentions of a composer who never abandoned the idea of reflecting on language, aware of the impossibility of saying new things with old formulas and of the fact that, at the end of the day, "the composer is the language that he creates." It's true that in the work of Romitelli this principle does not transmute into the rigid, unilateral vision of progress that had characterized the historic *avant-gardes*; but it nonetheless constitutes an essential chromosome of its DNA. Looking around, absorbing the influences that serve to strengthen its persuasiveness, Romitelli's music never holds back from creating its own language and, with this, its own world.

IN A STATE OF TRANCE,
IN HALLUCINATION, IN THE
ARRANGEMENT OF THE SENSES
OF A LIGHT SHOW, THE CONFINES
BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE
IMAGINARY BECOME BLURRED,
AND IT IS PRECISELY IN THESE
TERRITORIES THAT THIS MUSIC
INTENDS TO DWELL.

High and Low

For better or worse, this dual concept has marked the evolution of the entire history of Western music. Although the nature of the encounter between the traditions of serious music (from *stile antico* to the *musiques savantes*) and those of popular music, whether rural or urban, has not been straightforward, we can perhaps represent it, at least in terms of the framework of references in which Romitelli positioned himself, as a field of forces in which each pole causes the other to gravitate towards it, continually relaunching two major attitudes. In the first, what is recognized as "low" remains external, and it manifests itself in its specific difference. One could define this as the strategy of exoticism and immediately call to mind some well-known examples, from the *tziganeries* of Haydn or Brahms to the Spanish rhythms of Debussy. In the second, what is "low" is a humus from which a vital lifeblood is drawn. This is the strategy of assimilation and of *Durchkomponieren*, and here too there immediately come to mind many important examples: from the manner in which Corelli or Vivaldi allowed their writing to be populated by dance rhythms, to the sonic invention of Beethoven, who drew his inspiration from the streets of Vienna's quarters, to Mahler's *sinfonismo*, impregnated with *Ländler* and fanfares. Romitelli's music can immediately be recognized as an expression of this latter strategy. From the sonorities of psychedelic rock, ambient electronics, or techno, it draws an energy, an emotive impact, a gestuality, and a visionary force in stark contrast with the anemia of academic sound. This absorption goes hand in hand with a desire to elaborate a distinctive harmonic vocabulary capable of holding in check the clichés of consumer music. But what happens later is that, once they are assimilated, the "low" materials vivify the musical body proper and definitively modify its physiognomy. In this way it comes about that a viola expresses itself like an electric guitar, or that the sound of a bass instrument comes to form part of a complex and inharmonious sonic monad, or that a loop constrains an entire orchestra to derail. High and low are not only placed one next to the other, but they merge together in a musical result that is no longer either high or low, and is certainly not a middle way between the two either. In the end, the image that best represents the matter is that of an alloy forged from two or more metals: an original material that contains a number of properties that cannot be reduced to the elements of which it is composed.

Paroxysm

As if constituting a lesson in spectralism, Romitelli's music works on thresholds, transforming harmony into an instrument that generates sound and unheard-of temporal processes, exploring its borders with inharmoniousness and noise. Its originality consists in bringing this *démarche* to paroxysm, pursuing the excesses and shifts of feeling. The psychedelic nature of progressive rock to which it so readily makes recourse is one of the means that permits it to draw attention to its border zones, as one sees clearly in the major works. In a state of trance, in hallucination, in the arrangement of the senses of a light show, the confines between the real and the imaginary become blurred, and it is precisely in these territories that this music intends to dwell. In a certain way one could say that, without the will to explore these border zones, there would be no Romitelli style, a style in which there is a precise balance between a candid pleasure in discovery and a fundamental critical intent. The intention to dirty the *bel suono*, to bend the real with the prospect of producing an altered perception, can in fact be related back to an anti-rhetorical will and, at the same time, to a need to touch on one of the crucial features of the current consumer civilization. "Today," Romitelli observed in an interview, "the world seems to be a metaphor of the vanity and smallness of each one of us. Individual existential problems are amplified by those of an epoch that does not offer any point of reference, but, instead, only an extreme dehumanization and denaturalization." The broad design of *Professor Bad Trip* (1998–2000) can be interpreted not just as a lesson imparted by the underground to contemporary art music but as the allegory of an existential situation in which it is often difficult to distinguish the difference between simulation and reality and where the synthetic product ends up appearing to us more true than the natural. The abandonment of sonic naturalism reaches its apex in *Trash TV Trance* (2002), a piece for electric guitar which recalls the gestuality of Hendrix and the noise of Sonic Youth. Everything here is noise and saturation, almost as if it were the unseemly symbol of the immense mass of media rubbish that surrounds us, with visionary effects deriving from the action produced on strings by objects of every kind—bow, coin, sponge, razor—capable of rendering the final result even more saturated and unseemly. In Romitelli's music this paroxysm expresses a utopia of feeling that unsentimentally denounces the consequences of the communication society.

Degeneration

In many of Romitelli's compositions, what seem to assume the contours of simple linear processes undergo corrosions or torsions that completely deform their appearance. Behind the most simple material, like the three-note motif that opens *Amok koma* (2001), or the Strauss-like motif in *Audiodrome* (2002–2003), there lurk uncontrolled shifts. Repetition, inharmoniousness, saturation, distortion, loops all become instruments to bring about this metamorphosis of discursive elements that suddenly seem to derail, to jam, unveiling an unexpected violence. As has been said, precisely where the music of others generally develops, Romitelli's degenerates. This is a trait that he was very proud of, and rightly so, because this feature constitutes one of the major gambles of his music. To make degeneration a positive value is risky. The danger of finding oneself having struck a pose, in the presence of a superficiality of a generically alternative ("dark") attitude is always lying in wait. Perhaps not everything that Romitelli wrote escapes this trap, but his great works demonstrate clearly the extent to which his music has been able to assume the negative contours of disintegration, of degeneration, drawing from these paradoxical and extreme situations a sincere emotion. Mercifully, we don't need to read Adorno to remain enthralled when listening to *Professor Bad Trip*. In the energy of its overexposed sound, in the dilation of its hallucinated landscapes, one is aware of a stupor still intact: an authentic poetry that pulses in the midst of ruin.

Profundity

There is one feature that today more than any other seems to me to mark the music of Fausto Romitelli: its profundity. His writing, in putting to work the disintegration of sonic material, renders visible a desire to transcend every preoccupation with virtuosity or instrumental technique, in order to express something essential. In his works, behind those so often ironic or cryptic titles there lies an obstinate will to work in earnest. This music exudes a need to *not* be satisfied, to go right to the bottom of things. On listening to it one has the impression that the false icons of the media-dominated world are breaking to pieces, undermined by an awareness of the vanity of all things. The result, all things considered, is music of great profundity, a quality by no means common in the musical production of the initial part of this millennium.

Translated by Nicholas Crotty